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ABSTRACT

Most of the job losses that occurred in New York City after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center occurred in low-wage jobs held by lower-skilled workers. Many of those affected faced multiple obstacles limiting their employment prospects, including limited literacy and English language skills and a lack of "connections" to formal and informal mechanisms through which people typically get connected to jobs. Several programs offered by unions, public agencies, and non-profit organizations in New York City have responded to these learners in two ways--by focusing instruction on the job-related skills and knowledge learners need and by using referrals and other means to link learners to jobs and work-related training opportunities outside the basic skills program. Those interested in equipping low-skilled adults for a changing work environment should take the following actions: (1) be open to new ways of approaching work-related adult basic education; (2) develop the expertise needed to plan and deliver effective work-related education geared to learners' particular needs; and (3) advocate for new funding, better use of existing resources, and appropriate expectations from funders about ways adult education can help learners participate as workers. (Contains 7 web site addresses and 7 references.) (MN)

The New (and Ongoing) Job Crisis for Adult Learners

How Adult Educators Can Respond

by Paul Jurmo

An estimated 100,000 or more New Yorkers lost their jobs in the months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The attacks closed down businesses downtown and in the entertainment, hotel, restaurant, and travel industries in and around the city. These job losses (or reduced work hours and a commensurate loss of income and benefits) occurred primarily in low-wage jobs held by lower-skilled workers.

A report from the Fiscal Policy Institute, *World Trade Center Job Impacts Take a Heavy Toll on Low-Wage Workers* (2001), indicates that the five occupational categories incurring the greatest layoffs were waiters and waitresses, janitors and cleaners, retail salespersons, food preparation workers, and cashiers. An additional 76,000 workers avoided layoffs by working fewer hours and taking cuts in their wages and benefits. These reductions in work hours hit the taxi and car service industry and apparel manufacturing—especially in Chinatown—hardest. Member unions of the Consortium for Worker Education report that:

- As many as 2000 members of Building Service Local 32B-J of the Service Employees Industrial Union lost their jobs as custodians, cleaners, elevator operators, and building superintendents.
- Workers at local airports—ranging from baggage handlers to mechanics to limo drivers—lost their positions when airline travel ground to a halt.
- More than 4,000 members of the Hotel Trades Council Union were out of work within weeks of September 11.

A report by the New York City Partnership and Chamber of Commerce (2001) states that, "while many of these jobs will return, New York City will still have a net loss of approximately 57,000 jobs attributable to the attack at the end of 2003" (p.3).

These recent job losses exacerbate longer-term trends. For example, the Fiscal Policy Institute's report *The State of Working New York* (2002) points to the disappearance of manufacturing jobs in the city over the past two decades. Low-skill jobs that paid decent wages and benefits were thus already on the decline before September 11; the attacks and

the resulting economic downturn have simply made it even harder for a low-skilled person to find a job that pays a living wage.

Adult Learners' Ongoing Employment Needs

The recent crisis has thus diminished the employment-related prospects of New York City adults who have limited literacy and ESOL skills. The figures and examples given in this article come from our immediate experience in New York City because this is where the effects of September 11 have been disproportionately concentrated. However, low-wage jobs nationwide have been affected by an economic downturn that was exacerbated by the attacks. This effect in turn exacerbated an ongoing employment crisis. Well before September 11, adult educators knew—from local and national statistics and from their own interactions with adult learners—that the people served by literacy and ESOL programs tend either to hold jobs that provide low wages and few if any benefits or to be unemployed.

While a lack of basic literacy or ESOL skills is not the sole determinant of low income and unemployment, lack of basic skills is a significant factor that prevents people from getting decent jobs, staying in those jobs, moving to higher-level jobs, and getting access to the training and credentials they need for secure employment. Imagine yourself suddenly having limited English proficiency and/or no high school diploma. What kind of job would you expect to find?

Since the 1980s, U.S. employers have stated (Carnevale et al., 1990, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1992) that they need employees with a broader and deeper range of skills. They say that changing workplaces are now requiring workers who can handle new technologies, higher standards (for quality, safety, environmental protection, and so on), and more-demanding record-keeping and decision-making tasks now common in most industries.

Research by the Consortium for Worker Education, where I work, suggests that there is some truth in those claims. For example:

- Trucking company officials tell us that, to get a decent-paying job in a safe, clean shop, a truck mechanic now has to use a computer to order parts, read and log off on work orders, and communicate with other mechanics via email to get help in solving problems.

- Experts from the security industry state that, especially since September 11, security guards have to be able to question people wanting entry, communicate with emergency personnel, and log on to a building database to confirm visitors or deliveries.

- Housekeeping staff in major hotels now have to log on to computers to get work orders.

We also learned, in interviews with subway workers, that token booth operators need to be able to communicate orally with customers to give directions, communicate with customers and emergency personnel in the event of emergencies in the station, and prepare end-of-shift reports tabulating various categories of sales. While most clerks can handle those tasks satisfactorily now, many are also faced with the prospect of retraining for new jobs as many subway token booths are replaced by swipe-card machines. Those machines will require trained technicians to install and maintain them. Former token booth clerks will likely need retraining—and perhaps new basic skills like technical math—to move into those "higher-tech" jobs if they choose to pursue them.

WHAT STUDENTS WROTE

... Since September 11, many people lost their jobs and many companies closed.

The restaurants had fewer customers in Chinatown, and had fewer tourists. New York City was very quiet. Many factories were closed. My factory had less work and eventually had no work to do. ...

Yan Yan Tan
Student, Chinese American Planning Council

To take another example, food processing is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in New York City. Food-processing companies provide jobs to workers, especially immigrants, who, among other things, prepare the packaged meals that can be bought in neighborhood delicatessens. To move from entry-level food-preparation jobs to higher-level, better-paying positions, workers in these companies need a range of basic and technical skills. These skills include the ability to communicate with English-speaking co-workers or customers, to complete necessary paperwork, to understand health department regulations and safety procedures for cutting machines and other equipment, to read recipes, or to use computerized inventory equipment.

The bottom line is that, while a person with limited literacy and English language skills might still be able to get a job in New York City, that job is less likely to provide wages and benefits needed to support a family. In a September 2001 report prepared before the September 11 attacks, Public/Private Ventures recommended that New York City "launch an ambitious program to upgrade the education and skills of city residents. Otherwise, New York's ability to compete economically will be severely hampered by its disproportionately large unskilled workforce" (p.1). Then in March 2002, a report from the United Way of New York City stated that training in basic skills and work-related skills will be necessary to help low-skilled workers, especially immigrants with limited English skills, get back to work.

Many persons with limited basic skills face an additional obstacle that blocks their access to decent jobs: a lack of "connections" to formal or informal mechanisms through which people typically get connected to jobs. For example, some new arrivals in the United States may not have friends or relatives who can tip them off about job possibilities. Also, people who are already struggling to make ends meet may not be able to put in the time to make the rounds of employers to fill out job applications, go through job interviews, and "get a foot in the door."

Work-Related Curricula and Connections

This is probably old news for most adult basic education providers in New York and nationwide. They know that learners frequently want help upgrading skills and getting credentials, such as the GED, and that learners feel they need to move into more rewarding jobs. Programs have responded to those learner needs in two ways: *curriculum* and *connections*. That is, programs follow one or both of these courses of action:

- Focusing instruction on the job-related skills and knowledge learners need
- Using referrals and other means to link learners to jobs and work-related training opportunities outside the basic skills program

The following examples show how programs in New York City provide work-related services to learners who are already employed or who are looking for work.

WORK-RELATED CURRICULA

Henry Street Settlement House provides GED preparation, computer training, and job readiness workshops to Lower East Side residents. A case management course helps learners develop strategies for dealing with factors that block them from getting and keeping jobs. Interns from local university master's degree programs in social work or nursing facilitate discussions on such topics as time management, risk taking, anger management, choices and decisions, and conflict resolution. At the end of each session, learners write in their journals in order to solidify what they have learned, improve their writing skills, and give feedback to the facilitator about the effectiveness of the session.

Local 1199 of the Service Employees Industrial Union provides an extensive range of educational services to the city's healthcare workers. Local 1199 recognizes that better jobs in the changing healthcare industry require not just solid basic skills but, increasingly, college-level credentials. ESOL, GED, External Diploma Program, computer, and college prep classes are geared to helping learners get the skills and credentials they need to move on to higher-level training, either in the City University of New York system—for instance, to become LPNs or RNs—or through other specialized training programs for such jobs as X-ray technician, medical records specialist, or alcohol and substance abuse counselor. The course content might not always be highly job-specific—that is, it may not entail reading or writing workplace documents—but the overall orientation of all courses is to help participants get the training they need to maintain job security and move up the career ladder.

The Fortune Society has been providing education and other services to ex-offenders and at-risk youth to break the cycle of crime and incarceration. Its education program provides instruction in ESOL, reading and writing, math, GED preparation, and computer skills. Those classes include work-related skills such as résumé writing and conducting job searches on the web. Most students actively searching for employment participate in Fortune's Career Development Program, a two-week workshop in which participants practice job interview skills, prepare résumés, and discuss how their criminal justice backgrounds can affect their employability. The Career Development Program is developing relationships with employers in order to help participants connect to jobs.

In the literacy and pre-GED program at the Hudson Guild, learners use newspaper articles and other sources to better understand the job market and other issues, such as budgets for public-sector jobs, that affect their role in the economy. The purpose is to arm learners with critical thinking skills so they can

WHAT STUDENTS WROTE

. . . My life has only changed in fear of what will happen next here in New York. Since the September 11th terrorist attack, I don't like what I see and hear on the news every day. I'm afraid of what will happen next. I am afraid to go out or travel anywhere. I am especially afraid to travel on an airplane to visit my relatives in Yugoslavia. Because of what has happened, I don't feel safe.

I fear for my son's safety in school every day since the terrorist attack. The war against terrorists hasn't stopped the terrorists. I still fear what might happen next because of the anthrax in the mail and the young boy who flew the plane into the building in Florida. I want to feel safe again. I want to feel secure about going on a plane. I want life to be like it was before.

Vasvije Cenovski
Student, College of Staten Island Adult Learning Center

proactively plan their careers and find rewarding jobs rather than just being "plugged into" whatever is available.

CONNECTIONS TO JOBS

Learners in the Brooklyn Public Library's GED Program practice writing résumés, doing job searches on the Internet, and writing letters to prospective employers. This helps them prepare both to pass the GED exam and to improve their employment prospects after earning their diploma. In addition, they go with their teacher, Althea N. Davidson, to visit the local Worker Career Center (WCC). There the learners meet employment counselors, learn about other available education and job-placement services, and become comfortable with the center and its staff. Ms. Davidson points out that these visits serve as an endorsement of the WCC by a known and trusted teacher. Learners are thus more likely to return to the WCC, make an appointment with a counselor, and use its services.

Transport Workers Union Local 100 represents over 35,000 workers in the city's subway and bus system. Last year a New Technologies Committee conducted focus groups and interviews with union members and management representatives, as well as reviewing research reports, to analyze how new technologies were impacting transit industry jobs and what training and education members needed to retain their jobs and move into better ones. The result of this half-year needs assessment was a new union education and training initiative. The union is now offering classes in computer skills, basic electronics, ESOL, writing, and preparation for the civil service exam. The union is also working with transit industry experts and the Transit Authority to clarify what skills workers will need in the future and how to ensure that training and education connect workers to emerging jobs.

On September 12, 2001, the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE) began planning a response to the job losses that CWE knew would result from this disaster. The result was the Emergency Employment Clearinghouse (EEC), a job-counseling and referral center based at CWE's

midtown adult education facilities. People who lost their jobs after September 11 are eligible to receive job counseling and referrals either to job opportunities or, if needed, to education and training services to prepare them for jobs. CWE is also working with local unions and employers to find jobs for EEC participants. In one case, CWE is developing a test-preparation course for EEC clients interested in becoming utility workers. The course will cover relevant math skills, such as measuring, and the document-reading skills that are assessed in a test given to applicants for utility worker jobs. While the verdict isn't in yet on how effective these efforts will be, CWE can point to some early successes in placing people in jobs and in providing a safe place where people who lost their jobs can reorient themselves and begin reconnecting to the world of work.

Needed: A New Infrastructure for Work-Related Services

The massive job loss in the wake of September 11 underscores how vulnerable are the jobs and job prospects of the adult education population. The examples above show that New York City adult educators are willing and able to respond to employed and unemployed learners' work-related needs in creative ways, in a variety of program settings. However, adult educators must redouble their efforts to equip learners with options that will better prepare them for a changing work environment, as well as advocating for the resources that will enable educators to provide high-quality work-related services. Adult educators need to:

1. Be open to new ways of approaching work-related adult basic education.

2. Develop the expertise they need to plan and deliver effective work-related education geared to the particular needs of learners.

3. Advocate for the supports they need to do this work. These supports include:

- Appropriate (achievable, meaningful) expectations from funders about what adult education can do to help learners participate as workers.
- New funding and better use of existing resources to provide adult educators with the professional development, model curricula, evaluation and assessment tools, facilities, technologies, and other components needed for high-quality work-related education.

If we reconsider the potential benefits of high-quality work-related adult education and become active advocates for building the capacity of our programs to provide such education, we can serve our learners—and, by extension, their families and communities—and build stronger programs. The alternative is the current situation: a workforce that is underequipped to get jobs, remain employed, weather economic downturns, handle workplace demands, earn wages, support their families, pay taxes, and create stable communities.

WORK-RELATED EDUCATION RESOURCES

ABC CANADA
www.abc-canada.org
This Canadian organization pioneered a collaborative approach to workplace education that involved stakeholders—including learners—in defining how basic skills fit into the larger mission and culture of the workplace.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
www.ericacve.org
Click on Publications for a great collection of online resources for adult educators, including articles and digests on work-related learning.

National Adult Literacy Database
www.nald.ca
This website from Canada contains many documents on work-related basic skills. Search on "workplace."

National Institute for Literacy
www.nifl.gov
The NIFL site includes not only the Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards—which focus on preparing adults for work, family, and citizenship roles—but also a listserv and a special collection on work-related literacy.

System for Adult Basic Education Support
www.sabes.org
The SABES site includes a number of publications from the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative, a national model for a statewide workplace education effort. Search on "workplace."

Workforce Development Campus
www.jmu.edu/wdc
James Madison University offers an online training program for workplace educators.

Working for America
www.workingforamerica.org
The site of the AFL-CIO's Working for America Institute provides links to union education programs and other union-related information. Click on Publications to order "Worker-Centered Learning: A Union Guide to Workplace Literacy."

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